

# AN UNSPOKEN PROLOGUE TO A PUBLIC LECTURE AT ST. JOHN'S

[In Honor of Jacob Klein, 1899-1978] \*

The common sense of mankind has granted old men certain privileges in order to compensate them for the infirmities of old age or to make it easier for them to indulge those infirmities. Not the least of these privileges is the permission granted to old men to speak about themselves in public more freely than young men can in propriety do. I have always regarded it as both an honor and a pleasure to come to St. John's to lecture and to meet faculty members and students. But I also had a private reason for enjoying my journeys to St. John's. St. John's harbors—it is a perfect harbor for—my oldest friend, Jacob Klein. Permit me to pay homage to Mr. Klein on the present occasion, the first occasion after his sixtieth birthday. What I intend to do I regard as an act of duty although of a pleasant duty. Yet however innocent our actions may be as regards their intentions, the circumstances in which they are performed may cloak these actions with an appearance of malice. In such a situation one must not be squeamish and still do one's duty. In addition—such is the complexity of the things of the heart, even if we are virtuous men, we may derive some pleasure from the appearance of malice, provided we keep within certain bounds. In the present case the appearance of malice arises from Mr. Klein's idiosyncratic abhorrence of publicity—of anything which even remotely reminds of the limelight. I always found that Mr. Klein went somewhat too far in this but all too justified abhorrence. When we were in our twenties we worked every day during a longish period for some hours in the Prussian State Library in Berlin and we relaxed from our work in a coffee house close by the Library. There we sat together for many hours with a number of other young men and talked about everything which came to our mind—mixing gravity and levity in the proportion in which youth is likely to mix them. As far as Mr. Klein was concerned, there was, I am tempted to say, only one limit: we must not appear to the public as young men cultivating their minds; let us avoid at all costs—this was his silent maxim—the appearance that we are anything other than idle and inefficient young men of business or

---

\*The occasion for which this piece was written was the 60th birthday of Jacob Klein. The editors thought it to be a fitting tribute in his honor. —Ed.

of the lucrative professions or any other kind of drones. On such occasions I derived enjoyment from suddenly exclaiming as loudly as I could, say, "Nietzsche!" and from watching the anticipated wincing of Mr. Klein.

Nothing affected us as profoundly in the years in which our minds took their lasting directions as the thought of Heidegger. This is not the place for speaking of that thought and its effects in general. Only this much must be said: Heidegger who surpasses in speculative intelligence all his contemporaries and is at the same time intellectually the counterpart to what Hitler was politically, attempts to go a way not yet trodden by anyone or rather to think in a way in which philosophers at any rate have never thought before. Certain it is that no one has questioned the premise of philosophy as radically as Heidegger. While everyone else in the young generation who had ears to hear was either completely overwhelmed by Heidegger or else having been almost completely overwhelmed by him engaged in well-intentioned but ineffective rear-guard actions against him, Klein alone saw why Heidegger is truly important: by uprooting and not simply rejecting the tradition of philosophy, he made it possible for the first time after many centuries—one hesitates to say how many—to see the roots of the tradition as they are and thus perhaps to know, what so many merely believe, that those roots are the only natural and healthy roots. Superficially or sociologically speaking, Heidegger was the first great German philosopher who was a Catholic by origin and by training; he thus had from the outset a pre-modern familiarity with Aristotle; he thus was protected against the danger of trying to modernize Aristotle. But as a philosopher Heidegger was not a Christian: he thus was not tempted to understand Aristotle in the light of Thomas Aquinas. Above all, his intention was to uproot Aristotle: he thus was compelled to disinter the roots, to bring them to light, to look at them with wonder. Klein was the first to understand the possibility which Heidegger had opened without intending it: the possibility of a genuine return to classical philosophy, to the philosophy of Aristotle and of Plato, a return with open eyes and in full clarity about the infinite difficulties which it entails. He turned to the study of classical philosophy with a devotion and a love of toil, a penetration and an intelligence, an intellectual probity and a sobriety in which no contemporary equals him. Out of that study grew his work which bears the title "Greek Logistics and the Genesis

of Algebra.” No title could be less expressive of a man’s individuality and even of a man’s intention; and yet if one knows Klein, the title expresses perfectly his individuality, his idiosyncrasy mentioned before. The work is much more than a historical study. But even if we take it as a purely historical work, there is not, in my opinion, a contemporary work in the history of philosophy or science or in “the history of ideas” generally speaking which in intrinsic worth comes within hailing distance of it. Not indeed a proof but a sign of this is the fact that less than half a dozen people seem to have read it, if the inference from the number of references to it is valid. Any other man would justly be blamed for misanthropy, if he did not take care that such a contribution does not remain inaccessible to everyone who does not happen to come across volume III of section B of “*Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Mathematik, Astronomie und Physik*” and in addition does not read German with some fluency. One cannot blame Klein because he is excused by his idiosyncrasy. I hope that you, faculty, and students of St. John’s, do not accuse me of trespassing if I say: some man or body of men among you should have compelled Klein, if need be by starving him into submission, to close his eyes while you arrange for a decent English translation and its publication.<sup>1</sup> The necessity for his is in no way diminished by the fact that Mr. Klein is said to prepare now a new book which may contain a very long footnote giving the first intelligent account of the Platonic dialogue and which will probably be entitled *Mathematics in the Curriculum of the School of Gorgias*.<sup>2</sup> But it was not in order to make to you the foregoing suggestion that I made these prefatory remarks: I ask you to rise and join me in giving Mr. Klein an ovation.

<sup>1</sup> An English translation of this work, prepared by Eva Brann, was published by the M.I.T. Press in 1968 under the title *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*. —Ed.

<sup>2</sup> Klein was preparing to publish *A Commentary on Plato’s Meno*. It was brought out in 1965 by the University of North Carolina Press. —Ed.